WHAT ARE THE CO-OPS DOING

ABOUT PROBLEMS OF MEMBERSHIP EDUCATION, COMMUNITY GOODWILL AND AGRICULTURAL MOBILIZATION?

(Three Group Reports by Managers and Directors of Rural Electric Co-ops who attended the REA Management Conference held December 10-14, 1951, in Washington, D. C.

Rural Electrification Administration
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Discussion Summary of Group 1 -- "Developing a Strong Membership"

Reporter: Robert B. Awbrey, Manager, Marlboro Electric Cooperative, Inc., South Carolina.

A strong membership must be based upon a good information program. If the members--who are the owners--have the facts about their co-op business, then they can make sound decisions and give full and loyal support to their co-op.

Co-op officials face two principal problems in the information program they undertake: (1) What sort of information should be given the members, and (2) How to go about doing the job of telling the members.

(1) What to tell the members.

The members should have all the facts about their co-op. This is important so that members can help in building better community relations for the co-op. If the members have the facts they can correct misinformation and false accusations about the co-op. Tell the truth. The approach should always be positive rather than defensive.

The information program should give members practical aids that the member understands and can use. It is necessary to distinguish between information for general public information and that for members. The value of a local, neighborly approach must be kept in mind at all times in carrying on a program for members. It is felt that some of the Statewide newspapers need more of this local touch.

(2) How to reach the members.

a. Employees. Education is the job of all employees of the co-op. Regular meetings of employees at which they can learn the purposes and something of the operations of the co-op are recommended. The employees are in contact with members and the public almost constantly. What they do and what they say makes a good or bad impression of the co-op.

b. Newsletters. The local newsletter is considered one of the best techniques for influencing members in understanding and supporting their co-op. Because the newsletter talks about local people and about things that are familiar to members, it can have a high reader interest, if it is carefully prepared. Another important factor is its low cost in terms of the value received.

c. Statewide papers. It is felt that some of the Statewide papers need improvement (larger type, more attractive makeup, more local news) so that they would be more widely read.

d. Newspapers. Some advertising in community newspapers is advisable as a means of integrating the co-op into the community, but it is believed this has little influence on members. It is reported that in a few instances editors are refusing to print news stories about the co-ops unless the co-ops also buy advertising space.

e. Radio. Two types of radio broadcasts are desirable. Those over local stations should be timed for presentation along with weather reports or market news and deal with local people and information of local importance. Practically every farm has a radio. Listener response should be tested from time to time by offering leaflets, etc. Joint sponsorship of programs by several adjoining co-ops is often used to advantage in keeping down costs. Radio time can often be obtained free as part of a farm service program.

f. Meetings. Annual meetings and other local meetings (district meetings, group demonstrations, etc.) offer an opportunity for face-to-face contact with co-op officials and others interested in the co-op and rural electric power. The problem of the large percentage of members who do not attend the co-op's meetings needs more attention. One suggestion enthusiastically backed by those who have tried it is to invite a few selected members to each board meeting (different members each time). It is found that as the months go by this practice builds up a core of loyal members who feel closer to the co-op because they have actually participated at first hand in the functioning of the co-op. They feel they are "on the inside," and they encourage the participation and loyalty of their neighbors.

g. Good housekeeping. Visual appeal to the members is important. Such things as a clean office and use of the name of the co-op on trucks make a good impression on members and on other people, too.

Members of Group 1:

John Acklie, President, Lewis County Rural Electric Cooperative Assn., Lewistown, Mo.
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Guerald Haskins, Secretary-Treasurer, C.M.S. Electric Cooperative Assn., Inc., Meade, Kans.
Leland S. Haws, President, Garkane Power Assn., Inc., Richfield, Utah.
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Lewis Outlaw, President, Tri-County Electric Membership Corp., Goldsboro, N. C.
C. E. Robinson, Manager, Marshall County Rural Electric Membership Corp., Plymouth, Ind.
G. L. Skaggs, Manager, Crawford Electric Cooperative, Inc., Bourbon, Mo.
James C. Stephenson, Manager, Scott-New Madrid-Mississippi Cooperative Assn., Sikeston, Mo.

Discussion Summary of Group 2 -- "Building Good Community Relations"

Reporter: E. M. Tomlinson, Information Services Director, Indiana Statewide Organization.

How can a co-op build good community relations? What should be done? Who should do it?

1. The goodwill of the co-op membership is a prerequisite for building good community relations. This means, first of all, reliable electric service. It also means keeping members informed about the co-op's program with special emphasis on power use and member education.

2. Building good community relations should be a coordinated effort by the manager, directors, all employees, and the members. It was agreed that the community is all the people in the area which the co-op serves.

3. The manager, directors, and members should be encouraged to participate in service clubs, civic organizations, and community service activities. Membership in community organizations provides opportunity for telling the co-op story.

4. Every co-op should be represented in the U SDA County Agricultural Mobilization Committees. Twelve out of fifteen members of Group 2 are working on this program.

5. Working with young people is a good way of building good community relations.

   a. Cooperate with the vocational agriculture program in the schools. Offer assistance such as demonstrations, loan of projectors, films, and the like.

   b. Offer and receive permission from local and school libraries for the placing of pertinent co-op and electrification literature with them for teachers and students.

   c. Consider the idea of a junior board of directors. (See page 8 of the December-January issue of the RURAL ELECTRIFICATION NEWS for information on this.)

   d. Invite school bands to entertain at co-op annual meetings and other programs.

6. Use the annual meeting for building goodwill in the community.

   a. Draw the entire community into the co-op's annual meeting and its preparation.

   b. Invite prominent local people to participate in the program.

   c. Hold preparatory community meetings in the area served by the co-op as a build-up for the annual meeting. (District meetings are useful in co-ops with widespread territory.)

7. Participation in the defense mobilization effort by:

   a. Promoting a productive power use program.

   b. Making available the trained personnel of the co-op and co-op equipment in case of disaster.

8. Also mentioned as factors to consider in building good community relations:

   a. Keep the co-op out of partisan politics at every level.

   b. Cooperate with churches and church leaders.

   c. Make more effective use of press and radio. Maintain cordial relationships with dealers and merchants.

Members of Group 2:

William M. Blakkolb, President, Niobrara Valley Electric Membership Corp., O'Neill, Nebr.

Emil Blom, Manager, Carbon Power and Light Co., Saratoga, Wyo.

Reed S. Burr, Manager, Garkane Power Assn., Inc., Richfield, Utah.

Luther Farmer, Manager, Jackson County Rural Electric Cooperative Corp., McKee, Ky.

Overton Giles, Manager, Blue Grass Rural Electric Cooperative Corp., Nicholasville, Ky.

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James M. Stephenson, Manager, Black River Electric Cooperative, Ironton, Mo.

E. M. Tomlinson, Director of Information Services, Indiana Statewide Organization.

Discussion Summary of Group 3 -- "Mobilizing Cooperative Electricity for the Defense Job"

Reporter: Howard Lowe, Manager, R.S.R. Electric Cooperative, Inc., North Dakota.

Farmers need rural power to meet the new food production goals. Those who already have electricity need to be advised how to make more productive use of it.

These days a farmer must be a technician. He should be looking for all the new and improved methods of keeping himself successful in business. New and better methods of farming have resulted in better quality of food and fiber for everyone. Milk, meats, and other food products are consistently of a better grade because of electricity on the farm. This is one part of the story of rural electricity which is not known to the general public and especially to city dwellers.

What needs to be done?

(1) Co-ops should make it a matter of policy to develop a planned program of furnishing their members the information they need to make proper and effective uses of power for greater production.

(2) All co-ops need qualified electrification advisers to direct this program.

(3) Directors and members who have had experience in what can be done with electricity should use their farms for demonstrations because practical example is the best way of getting the story to others.

These demonstrations must show savings in time, in labor, and in dollars. To be fully effective they must clearly show what can be done with electricity as a tool to increase production. Each issue of the co-op newsletter should carry specific examples of how members have used electricity to meet their particular farm problems. These stories should be factual and if possible be illustrated with photographs.

The cross-section of rural America which was represented in the meeting of this Group included farmers who have demonstrated to their own satisfaction what can be done in putting electric power to work.

A North Dakota director pointed out that this fall he saved 2,000 bushels of wet wheat by using his electric elevator to keep damp grain moving to prevent spoiling. While he agreed that a grain dryer might have done the job better, he at least was able to use electric power to get the job done. His neighbors had to sell their damaged wheat at 40 to 50 cents a bushel. In losses like these the investment of time, labor, fertilizer, and machinery is lost. Increased production therefore can come from savings as well as from actual increases in yield.

A South Carolina director, a master farmer, pointed to a solution of a problem which applied to his section of the country. More and more farm laborers and tenant farmers were leaving for defense jobs. The co-op, through use of REA Section 5 loans and cooperation of a committee of appliance dealers, was able

to work out a plan whereby farm tenants can buy and install electric ranges and hot water heaters. The co-op pays the cost of installation and the dealer pays the first month's bill for power. In the terms of farm production alone the installation of these household appliances has meant an actual 20 percent increase for each farm laborer and has almost entirely halted the exodus of workers to other jobs.

Increased production may come indirectly from what we do not consider to be primarily an actual production tool. Electric ranges and hot water heaters mean that in this co-op area trained and competent farm workers are staying on the farm instead of leaving for other lines of work.

An Indiana manager pointed to the fact that electricity is a production necessity for the corn-hog farm. How could a man pump all the water needed without rural electric power? Windmills could never deliver the volume demanded.

A Kansas manager from a diversified farm area brought out that the increased demand for milk has stimulated more and larger dairy farms in his section. To meet the requirements for Grade A milk a dairy farmer must have power to provide hot running water, refrigeration, milking machines, etc. The electrification adviser on this co-op makes demonstrations on different dairy farms of all new ideas. One farmer with a back injury uses an electric lift to load milk cans. Some use heat lamps in the milk parlor on cold mornings. Others demonstrate the value of electric clippers. The co-op newsletter runs each story with pictures showing what is done and how much production is increased and how much time is saved.

Since much depends on the electrification adviser, it was agreed that this employee must have a good sense of public relations. He must know farm people and farm talk. He must be able to answer practical questions. However, the electrification adviser cannot do it all. The entire co-op staff can help. The directors and members must themselves take the responsibility for demonstrations and examples. The point was raised that electrification advisers need more guidance. The Extension Service, training schools set up by State-wide organizations and REA, and informational material available from REA can be used.

In this period of defense mobilization, the co-op must:

(1) Be prepared to help members with maintenance of their electrical equipment.

(2) Take necessary steps to assure reliable and uninterrupted service -- you can't close down production on an electrified farm.

(3) Make a determined effort to see that members get the best possible wiring, first-class electrical equipment, and adequate advice on repairs and maintenance. Dealers can be made to realize the importance of the rural market and can be educated in how to service it.

One note of caution: the co-op campaign must be to help farmers benefit from electricity. It must not be oversold so that members are burdened with electric equipment that they do not need. When members understand fully that they are joint owners of their co-op it is much easier to get across the power-use story. In other words, member education, member participation and productive use of power go hand in hand.

Members of Group 3:

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